



# Literary Enigma

*The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*  
(Peer-reviewed and Indexed)

Vol. 1, Special Issue: 7

July 2025

## Article No 6

1. Research Fellow,  
Department of English,  
Lalit Narayan Mithila  
University, Darbhanga
2. Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
C.M. College, Lalit  
Narayan Mithila  
University,  
Darbhanga.

Page No: 33-38



## The Formation of Women's Organisations in Assam and Their Role in the Nationalist Movements: A Study of Assam Mahila Samiti, Mukti Sangha and Mrityu Bahini

Guriya Kumari<sup>1</sup>, and Dr. Tanim Kumari<sup>2</sup>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16477147>

### Abstract

The struggle for independence was a challenging journey, fueled by the sacrifices of numerous Indians. However, the historical narrative often overlooks the significant contributions of many individuals, particularly women. Women, both individually and collectively as part of various groups, played a vital role in the nationalist cause. This paper delves into the critical role of women's organizations in Assam before independence, shedding light on their invaluable contributions to the Indian nationalist movement. Within the broader context of the national fight for freedom, Assamese women emerged as prominent figures, establishing multiple organizations that defied colonial rule and traditional male-dominated norms. The formation of groups such as the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Mukti Sangha, Mrityu Vahini, and others, and their active participation in movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement, epitomized their unwavering commitment to the cause of national independence.

These organizations not only raised political awareness among women but also addressed societal issues such as education, healthcare, and the eradication of oppressive customs like child marriage and purdah. Assamese women played a pivotal role in mobilizing the masses, advocating for self-reliance, and opposing British imperialism through grassroots activism and collaboration with male nationalists. Their endeavors significantly influenced the integration of Assam into the broader framework of the Indian independence movement, while laying the groundwork for feminist movements in the province post-independence. This study aims to spotlight the often-overlooked accomplishments of these women's organizations, underscoring their simultaneous efforts to advance both nationalist and feminist objectives in Assam during a pivotal period in Indian history.

**Keywords:** Assamese women, independence, nationalists, organisations, participation, struggle.

This work is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

## **The Formation of Women's Organisations in Assam and Their Role in the Nationalist Movements: A Study of Assam Mahila Samiti, Mukti Sangha and Mrityu Bahini**

### **Introduction**

The historical records of women's participation in national movements, especially within the Indian setting, have frequently been neglected in traditional historical accounts. This omission symbolises the entrenched patriarchal systems that have historically stifled women's voices and marginalised their contributions. In recent decades, feminist scholars have aggressively sought to recover and revise these narratives, utilising feminist theories to contest conventional history.

One significant example of women's activism occurred during Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement against British rule in the early 20th century. Women from Assam played a crucial role in this movement, with Gandhi himself acknowledging their substantial involvement. His recognition was not just a mere acknowledgment; it was a strategic encouragement for Assamese women to break free from traditional gender roles and engage actively in social and political spheres.

The participation of Assamese women did not stop with the non-cooperation movement; it extended into subsequent national movements such as the civil disobedience movement and the Quit India movement. Through these campaigns, women's organizations in Assam made valuable contributions that were integral to the broader struggle for independence. This paper seeks to assess and interlink the contributions of Assamese women's organizations across these pivotal movements, highlighting the continuity and evolution of their activism within the framework of India's fight for freedom. By doing so, it underscores the essential role that Assamese women played in challenging both colonial rule and patriarchal norms, offering a more nuanced understanding of their impact on the Indian National Movement.

### **The Formation of Women's Organisations in Assam**

The history of the foundation of the Assamese women's organisation dates back to the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which had an indirect influence on Assam as well, mostly through the actions of Assamese students who were studying in Calcutta. The Assamese Students Literary Society was established in Calcutta in 1889. The Assam Association, the earliest contemporary political social organisation in Assam, was established in 1903 by a small group of educated and politically aware men. The inaugural state conference of the Association took place in 1905, marking a significant transformation in Assam's social and political organisation. The Assam Chhatra Sanmilan was established in 1916 by Assamese students who were engaged in literary societies in Calcutta and other places in Assam. Its primary objectives were to promote cultural and educational activities. The inaugural conference of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, a literary association, took place in Sibsagar in 1917. All these organisations, which shared the common goal of advancing the Assamese people, were interconnected, with many of the same individuals being members of many organisations. The yearly conferences, serving as platforms for talks on various social and political issues concerning the interests of the Assamese people, were typically conducted at the same sites and on consecutive dates. The participants are transitioning from one to another. Nevertheless, these places and forums were exclusively limited to men. However, in 1916, the president of the Assam Chhatra Sanmilan at that time instructed his three young daughters, who were enrolled in schools in Calcutta, to attend the conference and showcase their singing talents on stage. This caused upheaval in society during a time when child marriage was customary among higher social classes and there were social restrictions on women's public visibility. The presence of young girls caused a great deal of tension. Nevertheless, women started participating in the All India Congress Sessions when Dr. Kadambini Ganguly established the practice in 1889. In a similar vein, Lakshminath Bezbaroa insisted on having his wife join him at the Assam Association meeting held the next day. Consequently, the inclusion of girls and

women at these seminars was widely acknowledged. The establishment and actions of nationalist groups among the Assamese population paved the way for the founding of women's organisations in Assam.

Women's organizations at the local level came up to articulate women's problems as well as the Nationalist cause. The first women's organization, *Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti*, was formed in Dibrugarh in 1915 under the leadership of Hemaprova Das, the headmistress of the first Girls' High School of Assam. Their chief aim was to encourage women's education and to provide help to destitute women. This was followed by *Sibsagar Mahila Sammilani*. It was formed in 1916 to mobilize women and to raise in them a nationalist sentiment. This organization celebrated the annual *Joymati Utsav* to make a platform for women to organize themselves. *The Nowgong Mahila Samiti* was formed in the year 1917, and the *Tezpur Mahila Samiti* in the year 1919. All these organizations took up the cause of women and endeavored to create in them a sense of self-respect and dignity. These organizations created an awareness among women of the urgency to secure a good education for themselves and others. They considered education as the only means to transcend the barriers of traditional customs to attain equal status in society. Moreover, many journals like *Banhi*, *Milan*, and *Assam Hiteishi*, which had wide circulation and readership, gave women a sense of what was happening in various organizations at the pan-Indian level, particularly in Bengal, and created a sense of awareness.

### **Assam Mahila Samiti**

One of the most significant developments in the history of the Assamese women's movement was the formation of a state-level organization called the Assam Mahila Samiti, which came into existence in 1926 under the leadership of Chandraprova Saikiani. This organization came up under rather unusual circumstances. In the annual conference of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1925, Chandraprova Saikiani was a delegate and was on the dais with other male members. As was the custom, the other women occupied their seats behind a bamboo barricade, as was the norm of the *pardah system*. Chandraprova Saikiani could not tolerate this discrimination and exhorted all the women to break the barricade and come forward to sit with the men striking against the system. Chaos followed, and the meeting was dissolved. The next year, in the Dhubri session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the *Mahila Samiti* was formed. This organization later took up the cause of women and also mobilized the women of the Nationalist movement. Apart from spreading women's education to every nook and corner of Assam, the *Samiti* took up the welfare of the mother and the child along with fighting for the cause of opium prohibition, the removal of child marriage, the spread of *Khadi*, and other indigenous industries. They also took special care to help orphans and destitute women and to remove untouchability. The *samiti* was represented in the All India Women's Congress in 1928. In 1934, this organization was renamed *Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti*. The *Samiti* published two journals: *Abhijatri* and *Abhijan*, which functioned as their mouthpiece. Thus, it played an important role in bringing about awareness among women to fight against their repression and to develop a sense of self-respect. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was introduced in India to prohibit the system of child marriage. The members of the *Assam Mahila Samiti* took an active part in preventing the parents from getting their children married off at a tender age. Members like Rajbala Das, Snehilata Bhattacharya, and Nalinibala Devi took the initiative to involve women in these activities. As a result of all these public activities and participatory initiatives, women became aware of many legal aspects.

Women's awareness of the outside world vis-à-vis their subordinate position in society was highlighted through various articles in women's journals. But the greatest moment of self-reckoning came with the freedom struggle. It was a struggle for the freedom of the country and the emancipation of women. *Assam Mahila Samiti* worked hard for the upliftment of women, particularly, insisting on their education among other issues such as prohibiting child marriage and equality of sexes in all spheres of life.

### **Non-cooperation Movement and the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti**

“There is a time in men’s lives when the urge to serve is very strong. The mind is at peace only by serving the motherland.” – Nalinibala Devi.

The Nationalist Movement that swept across the country touched the lives of Assamese women substantially and considerably. The new consciousness amongst women about their role in the nationalist movement prepared the stage for epoch-making changes in society. As more and more women acquired education and the women’s agenda received due attention during the nationalist struggle, many women came out to achieve their common end.

After 1920, Assam's interactions with other states in India, including Bengal, expanded. Following Gandhi's initial visit, numerous prominent leaders from all over India, such as C. F. Andrews, Rajendra Prasad, K. D. Malviya, and others, subsequently visited Assam. Additionally, an increasing number of Assamese delegates, including student leaders, actively participated in Congress sessions held throughout the country. Consequently, this allowed the Assamese people to develop a broader awareness of events occurring in other states. The leaders praised the exceptional abilities of the Assamese women weavers, and even Gandhiji acknowledged it in *Young India*, which was subsequently republished in several Assamese newspapers. This contributed to enhancing the confidence of women from Assam, and even leaders understood the importance of women joining the movement. One of the key initiatives of the non-cooperation movement was the development of spinning and weaving. The accomplishment of Assamese women in this aspect was noteworthy. The majority of women in Assam, regardless of their caste, creed, or social standing, possessed exceptional skills in spinning and weaving. The women residing in the rural areas of Morigaon in the Nagaon district were organised and encouraged to engage in the process of spinning and weaving the khadi cloth, which was subsequently utilised in the construction of the pandal during the Pandu session of the Indian National Congress in 1926.

During Gandhiji's journey to Assam, he was greeted by a prominent Assamese woman named Bar Raja, who presented him with a finely crafted textile made from hand-spun thread. Gandhiji praised Assam, stating that it would fully embrace the concept of Swadeshi. Its ladies can produce an abundance of woven goods for their own needs. Gandhiji appealed to boycott foreign goods during a meeting that took place on August 18, 1921, in Guwahati. Consequently, after the conference, he suggested the idea of burning foreign garments in a bonfire. Many women discarded their formerly cherished foreign garments in significant quantities.

Another important contribution of Assamese women during the non-cooperation movement was the Tilak Swaraj Fund. Mahatma Gandhi announced the formation of the Tilak Swaraj Fund as a homage to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, which aimed at collecting one crore rupees to aid the freedom struggle and resistance to British rule. Assamese women contributed both in cash and in kind to the aid. Twelve ladies from Sibsagar donated all their valuable ornaments to the fund. Instances of parting with diamond rings were also reported. Bhanumati Talukdar, whom Gandhiji called the “Sarojini” of Assam, left her family (husband and children) to work exclusively for the Congress. Many of the women left their jobs and joined the movement for the service of the country. The role of Guneswari Devi, who took the initiative to organise the local girls during the non-cooperation movement for the Khadi mission and during the civil disobedience, went door to door explaining and advocating for the significance of the protest. She was arrested by the British government for one year and one month under the Defence of India rule, and in this way, she became the first Assamese woman to bear such consequences. But this could not stop her activism, and she served for the country till India got independence.

### **The Civil Disobedience Movement and “Mukti Sangha”**

The civil disobedience movement was initiated by Gandhiji in 1930, which coincided with a period of increasing awareness among women. Even British officials acknowledged that the

success of this movement was not solely due to the protests led by Congress leaders but also owed much to the efforts of countless illiterate women who fervently stood up for the freedom of their country. Jawaharlal Nehru himself attested to the remarkable turn of events that unfolded while they were imprisoned, as it was the women who prominently took charge of the struggle, surprising not only the British government but also the men within their community. In Assam, women organized picketing in front of educational institutions to dissuade students from attending classes and to promote enrollment in government schools. They also engaged in active participation in fundraising for the Congress and in campaigns against untouchability, as well as in the promotion of Hindi as the national language.

During the same period, several female students from Assam decided to establish a revolutionary organization named the “Mukti Sangha” on the premises of the Kamrup Mahila Samiti (Women's Association) building. Among them were Pushpalata Das, the general secretary of the students' union at Panbazar Girls' High School, Sarala Saxena, Jyotsna Mazumdar, and Punyaprova Barua. These girls took a solemn pledge to strive for the complete liberation of the country from foreign rule, sealing their commitment with their own blood. Subsequently, Sukumari and Parul Moitra, the daughters of Suren Moitra, a prominent revolutionary from Rajashahi, also joined the “Mukti Sangha”. In 1930, members of the “Mukti Sangha” convened a condolence meeting to mourn the passing of Motilal Nehru and organized protests against the death of Bhagat Singh. Pushpalata Das rallied for picketing in front of Pan Bazar Girls High School, which proved to be highly successful; she was, however, expelled from school once the authorities became aware of her activities.

Gandhiji's constructive program also encompassed the prohibition of opium and liquor, in which the women of Assam also actively participated by picketing outside opium and liquor shops. Those who resisted giving up intoxicants faced social boycotts. Dariki Das Baruah, an anti-opium activist from Golaghat, was arrested on February 1, 1932, for his involvement in anti-opium picketing and was subsequently imprisoned for six months.

### **Women's Role in the Quit India Movement: The Formation of “Shanti Bahini” and “Mrityu Bahini”**

The World War II and the fear of Japan's attack on India due to British involvement in the war, Gandhiji decided to launch the Quit India movement on 9 Aug 1942 against the Britishers to leave the country and attain *Swaraj*. However, when the Britishers knew about the movement, they arrested Gandhiji and other important Congress leaders to stop them from organising it. But even after the movement was a success, men and women from different parts of the country marched for liberation. The Quit India movement was initiated in Assam, India, where the British authorities apprehended leaders of the Congress Party.

During the Quit India movement, Gandhiji gave the slogan “Do or die.” The women of Assam understood the concept of this slogan in their own way. Women in Assam formed two types of groups: one was the peaceful march, i.e., “Shanti Bahini,” which followed the Gandhian non-violent way, and the other was the death squad or the “Mrityu Bahini,” where women were ready to sacrifice their lives for the country. A resolution was passed in Darrang to raise the National flag at courts and police stations, as they symbolised the presence of the British Empire. Women, such as Kanaklata Barua, joined the suicide squad and encountered intimidation from the police. Kanaklata willingly undertook the task of raising the flag in a nonviolent manner but was fatally shot by the police. Bhogeswari Phukanani, a courageous nationalist, was fatally attacked in Nagaon during the British occupation of the Congress Office. A mob in the village of Dumdumia fatally assaulted Khahuli Nath and her husband, Ponaram Nath. Golok Chandra Neog, a member of a group known for engaging in suicidal acts, was fatally shot by law enforcement officers. Approximately 500 female revolutionaries in Assam bravely confronted the oppressive actions of the British, and their names will forever

be honoured by the country. The sacrifice of these women and the severe injuries endured by other female revolutionaries throughout the liberation struggle will be commemorated.

### Conclusion

The women of Assam selflessly contributed to the nation during different phases of the Nationalist movements. Assamese women have shown valour by effectively organising themselves and selflessly donating their *streedhan* to support the campaign. Throughout the non-cooperation campaign, they participated in picketing and boycotting foreign products while enhancing Khadi's production. A symbolic march was organised in Assam during the civil disobedience campaign. Furthermore, during the Quit India movement, they made the supreme sacrifice for the motherland. Alongside their service to the nation, they also facilitated the progress of other women in their quest for gender equality. Their accomplishments are extraordinary.

### References

- 1) Bhuyan, Arun Chandra. *Political History of Assam*. Vol. II, Publication Board Assam, 2019.
- 2) Baruah, S. L. *Status Of Women In Assam*. Om Sons Books Distributors, 1992.
- 3) Guneswari Devi and the Quit India Movement in Nagaon. Feb 2023-Feb 2024, Nagaon, Assam. <https://amritmahotsav.nic.in/district-repository-detail.htm?13566>
- 4) Hazarika, Nizara. *Colonial Assam and Women's Writing*. Authorpress, 2015.
- 5) Joshi, Divya. *Gandhiji on Khadi*. Gandhi Book Centre, 2002.
- 6) Lal, L David & Barua, Suranjana. Gandhi's Role in India's North-East: Issues of Reform and Integration. 10.1142/9789811240096\_0012, 2021.
- 7) Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. OUP, 1985.
- 8) Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness from the Middle Ages to 1870*. OUP, 2009.
- 9) Mahanta, Aparna. *Journey of Assamese Women 1836-1937*. Publication Board Assam, 2008.
- 10) Misra, Tillotoma. *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study of the Assamese Renaissance, 1826- 1926*. Western Book Depot, 1987.
- 11) Saikia, Arupjyoti. "Gandhi's four visits to Assam." *Hindustan Times*. Sep 27, 2019. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/gandhi-s-four-visits-to-assam/story-vy5ihuftNmSAh79eBwmf6L.html>
- 12) Sharma, Anil Kumar. *Quit India Movement in Assam*. Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2007.
- 13) <https://blog.mygov.in/woman-freedom-martyrs-of-assam/>
- 14) Gupta, Nandini. Deconstructing the Hailing of "Mother India". *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(9), 128-141, 2021. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss9/9/>